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# VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE PROBLEM OF AGING

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Philosophy  
The University of Mississippi

By

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## ABSTRACT

It seems wrong that a theory of a good life, well-being, or flourishing would be unable to accommodate those normal changes that distinguish natural aging and dying processes from external forces which truly do impede life. I argue in this paper that several versions of contemporary virtue ethics, which depend heavily on a theory of the good life, suffer from this very defect. I examine the difficulties experienced by contemporary Aristotelian-based virtue ethics in accommodating natural aging into well-being and flourishing lives, and ask whether those difficulties are intrinsic to Aristotle's theory itself. I examine Aristotle's theory in the context of its ability to accommodate natural aging and determine that Aristotle's virtue ethics accommodates natural aging. I argue that some contemporary virtue ethical theories are better at accommodating natural aging than others, but that each is defective in this regard, and that the degree of difficulty experienced by each theory lies in the degree to which the theory strays from Aristotle's conception of "activity." Finally I discuss options for virtue ethics approaches to ethical theory that can accommodate natural aging into well-being and a flourishing life, concluding the necessary level of activity may be satisfied by dialectical activity that requires only action based on a firm and stable disposition as determined with reason.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
PART I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
PART II: ARISTOTLE’S VIRTUE ETHICS AND AGING.....	8
PART III: CONTEMPORARY VIRTUE ETHICS.....	24
PART IV: CONCLUSION.....	40
REFERENCES.....	45
VITA.....	47

## VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE PROBLEM OF AGING

*Her life had no external aims—only a need to exercise her various functions and inclinations was apparent. She had to eat, sleep, think, speak, weep, work, give vent to her anger, and so on, merely because she had a stomach, a brain, muscles, nerves, and a liver. She did these things not under any external impulse as people in the full vigor of life do, when behind the purpose for which they strive that of exercising their functions remains unnoticed. She talked only because she physically needed to exercise her tongue and lungs. She cried as a child does, because her nose had to be cleared, and so on. What for people in their full vigor do as an aim was for her evidently merely a pretext. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*.*

*Then does knowledge of this good carry great weight for [our] way of life, and would it make us better able, like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark? Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2 1094a23-25.<sup>1</sup>*

### I. INTRODUCTION

It seems wrong that a theory of a good life, well-being, or flourishing would be unable to accommodate those normal changes that distinguish natural aging and dying processes from external forces which truly do impede life. Consider for example, a comparison of the blues piano man, Pinetop Perkins and the actress, Elizabeth Taylor. Pinetop toured with Ike Turner in the 1950's and played with Muddy Waters in the 1960's and '70's. At least when it came to being at the top of his craft as a Bluesman in his youth and middle age, Pinetop clearly flourished. As we all do, Pinetop aged, but he also continued to flourish. He went on jamming in the clubs and collecting Grammy Awards until shortly before his death from cardiac arrest in March of 2011. He was 97. His friend, Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, said, "We knew he lived a good life. What can you say about the man? He left here in his sleep. That's the way I want to

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from *Nicomachean Ethics* are based on Irwin (1999).

go."<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Taylor who, despite possessing rare beauty and even greater fame and wealth than Perkins, was characterized as merely surviving emotional and physical setbacks, life-threatening illnesses and accidents, and several near-death experiences.<sup>3</sup> It seems a poor theory of “good life” that cannot distinguish between the aging but flourishing Pinetop Perkins<sup>4</sup> and the aging but surviving Elizabeth Taylor.

Many contemporary virtue ethicists who base their theories on Aristotle’s<sup>5</sup> work, however, have difficulty incorporating aging as part of normal human life into their theories. In this paper I examine the difficulties experienced by contemporary Aristotelian-based virtue ethics in accommodating natural aging into well-being and flourishing lives, and ask whether those difficulties are intrinsic to Aristotle’s theory itself. After presenting a general overview in Part I, I examine Aristotle’s theory in the context of its ability to accommodate natural aging in Part II. I conclude that Aristotle’s virtue ethics accommodates natural aging. In Part III, I argue that some contemporary virtue ethical theories are better at accommodating natural aging than others, but that each is defective in this regard, and that the degree of difficulty experienced by each theory lies in the degree to which the theory strays from Aristotle’s conception of

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<sup>2</sup> “Longtime Blues Piano Player Pinetop Perkins Dies,” *The Associated Press*, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=134746682>. (Last accessed March 23, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> “During a lifetime of emotional and physical setbacks, life-threatening illnesses and accidents, and several near-death experiences, Ms. Taylor was a survivor. ‘I’ve been lucky all my life,’ she said in 1992, just before turning 60. ‘Everything was handed to me. Looks, fame, wealth, honors, love. I rarely had to fight for anything. But I’ve paid for that luck with disasters.’ At 65, she said on the ABC News program ‘20-20’: ‘I’m like a living example of what people can go through and survive. I’m not like anyone. I’m me.’ Mel Gussow, ‘Elizabeth Taylor, Lifelong Screen Star, Dies at 79,’ *The New York Times*, March 23, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/24/movies/elizabeth-taylor-obituary.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/24/movies/elizabeth-taylor-obituary.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&hp). (Last accessed March 23, 2011.)

<sup>4</sup> For another example, see Stephen Holden, “Blossom Dearie, Cult Chanteuse, Dies at 84,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 8, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/09/arts/music/09dear.html>. (Last accessed March 23, 2011.)

<sup>5</sup> In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Robert Merrihew Adams develops a “Framework for Ethics” based on a “good life” as opposed to “right action” that is more Platonic in nature. Adams has less difficulty with the problem addressed in this paper, but raises other issues just as problematic. While the primary focus of this paper is theories based in Aristotle’s work, Adams’ thesis will also be discussed as an option for an approach to a virtue ethics theory that can accommodate natural aging and because the comparison of the neo-Platonist approach to the neo-Aristotelian approach is useful in elucidating this paper’s thesis.



“activity.” I conclude by discussing options for virtue ethics approaches to ethical theory that can accommodate natural aging into well-being and a flourishing life.

### *A Brief Overview of Virtue Ethics*

Virtue ethics is generally recognized as one of the three predominate ethical theories in western philosophical thought. It is distinguished from the other two, utilitarianism and deontology (each in a variety of forms) by being based on the concepts of “being” rather than “doing,”<sup>6</sup> being agent-centered rather than act-centered, and /or being based on concepts of “good” and leading a “good life” rather than on the concepts of “right” and “doing the right thing.”<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that deontology and utilitarianism do not consider “the good.” Indeed, utilitarianism’s basic premise that one should so act as to maximize “the good.” Utilitarianism first determines what constitutes “the good” (frequently characterized as “pleasure”) and then directs that one act in a way such that the consequences of one’s act maximize that good. This famously leads to determinations that seem to run counter to our ethical intuitions, for example, that it is “right” to kill an innocent person if the result is saving the lives of several other innocent persons. Deontologists on the other hand would object to this conclusion. Deontology bases its determination of right action on a duty to do what is right regardless of the consequences of the act. Killing an innocent person is never “right” regardless of the “good” it may do. Deontology does recognize “good,” as the conclusion that it is never “right” to kill an innocent person is based, at least in part, on respect for humans as “a good” that underlies, for example, Kant’s imperative that humans never be treated merely as means to an end. While this imperative is *derived from* the argument that moral truths must be *a priori* and thus cannot be

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<sup>6</sup> As discussed below a more accurate characterization of virtue ethics is being regularly engaged in certain kinds of actions, and not a description of how many feats a person can accomplish.

<sup>7</sup> These concepts are inter-related. However, this paper will focus on “leading a good life.”

said to be *based on* a concept of the good, Robert Johnson asserts that in Kant's view moral philosophy should say something about the ultimate end of human endeavor, the Highest Good, and its relationship to the moral life: "In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argued that this Highest Good for Humanity is complete moral virtue together with complete happiness, the former being the condition of our deserving the latter. Unfortunately, Kant noted, virtue does not insure wellbeing and may even conflict with it. Further, there is no real possibility of moral perfection in this life and indeed few of us fully deserve the happiness we are lucky enough to enjoy."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, utilitarianism and deontology both give priority to determining what is "morally right." Deontologists explicitly prioritize the "right", but Hurka explains, utilitarians are no less committed to the concept. For utilitarians a typical formulation is that "every 'agent is *morally required* to perform the act with the best consequences" (Hurka 2007:26).<sup>9</sup>

Virtue ethics, on the other hand, is based on acting from a virtuous character, rather than acting based on an assessment of consequences or based on a set of duties or rules. Each contemporary virtue ethics theory<sup>10</sup> is grounded in a particular conception of "good" that relates to what it means to lead a "good life." Of course, the concept of what it means to live a good life itself is rife with difficulties and complexities, and virtue ethicists differ in the characterization of what it means to lead a good life. In general, however, each is based on the idea of "flourishing"

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Robert, "Kant's Moral Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/kant-moral>>. (Last accessed April 23, 2012.)

<sup>9</sup> Hursthouse argues in "Normative Virtue Ethics" that virtue ethics can also give an account of which actions are right or wrong, thus accomplishing the same end as utilitarianism and deontology. (Bonjour 2007:406-414.) Her argument seems basically sound, as do her criticisms of the standard characterizations of the premises on which the other theories reach the "right action." However, the ability of virtue ethics to move beyond a characterization of what it means for a human to live a good life to directions for right actions in particular situations is not important to this paper. Here it is sufficient that we be able to distinguish a class of ethical theories as being based on living a good life from "rival" theories based on utilitarian or deontological principles.

<sup>10</sup> I do not claim an exhaustive review of contemporary virtue ethicists here, but refer to prominent works by Thomas Hurka (*Perfectionism*), Richard Kraut (*What is Good and Why*), Talbot Brewer (*The Retrieval of Ethics*) as representative of major trends presently pervading virtue ethics theory.

embedded in Aristotle's thought. Like Aristotle, each of the contemporary virtue ethics theorists focuses primarily on what is "good" in terms of living a good *human* life<sup>11</sup> and depends heavily on a conception of human well-being, or what it means for humans to "flourish." Aristotle uses the term "*eudaimonia*," which is usually translated as "happiness," but he uses it in a non-hedonist sense and better captures the concepts of well-being or flourishing as a human being.<sup>12</sup>

To lead a good life is to live well in the sense of flourishing as a human being. What it means to flourish as a human being determines what is a virtue: those characteristics that cause one to flourish as a human being are virtues, those that lessen one's flourishing are vices. But, again, each theorist has his or her own sense of what it means to flourish as a human being. Each begins the search for human flourishing in human nature, attempting to establish what distinguishes man from plants and animals which share in one form or another with man the attribute of "living." The theorists generally arrive at some aspect of mankind that relates to our ability to reason,<sup>13</sup> but include physical, financial, and social abilities as well, "For it is a bit much to swallow that a man in pain and hunger and poor and friendless is flourishing, as Aristotle himself admitted" (Blackwell 1981:26).

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<sup>11</sup> Kraut extends his thought to non-human beings and even plant life, but his discussion of non-human life is not the focus of his theory and is not of importance to the issues raised in this paper. See, e.g., Kraut 2007: 88-91.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle notes that while everyone seems to agree that "happiness" is the greatest good, there are many different uses of the word "happiness." This does not seem to have changed in the intervening centuries. Describing a recent poll of adults conducted in 24 countries, *The Economist* noted that while 77% of respondents now describe themselves as "happy" (up from 74% prior to the global economic recession), "the term means different things to different people" and thus the "...poll, measuring degrees of happiness, is not strictly comparable with those that ask about 'well-being' ... or 'life satisfaction.'" "Chilled Out: Measures of Well-being," *The Economist*, February 25, 2012, at 72.

<sup>13</sup> While not often cast in the specific phrase "desire to understand," the phrase does seem particularly apt for illustrating the point being made and to give some meaning to the distinction between man and other forms of life beyond that conveyed by just "to reason" or "to deliberate." All three appear in Aristotle and Lear notes "Aristotle's *Metaphysics* begins, 'All men by nature desire to know'" and asserts that "Aristotle is attributing to us a desire, a force, which urges us on toward knowledge" (Lear 1988:1). However, the phrase as used by Aristotle and Lear has a more specific meaning: attaining knowledge of first philosophy and science proper (*epistēmē*). (I am indebted to Steven Skultety for this point.)

### *Explanation of the problem of aging for virtue ethics*

As noted above, what it means to live life changes as we grow older and many aspects of our lives can be characterized as “diminished” as we age. If our theory of what it means to live well cannot accommodate those changes, it precludes all humans from living a good life and is virtually useless as either a guide to right action or a guide to a good life. Doubtless, intense unrelenting pain, extreme poverty, and the like do severely impede, if not prevent, a flourishing life when they occur at unexpected stages of that life. One key to a viable theory is being able to distinguish between those changes that are part of the natural process of aging as they are a natural part of human life, and those diminutions in capacity brought about by external forces, such as being paralyzed by accidents or violence, a distinction that can easily be extended to the normal forgetfulness of aging and the effects of diseases or disorders such as dementia.

Each contemporary virtue ethics theory incorporates its own conception of what well-being or flourishing entails, and as a result, each theory in at least some respects views any loss or diminution of physical or mental capacities as lessening the well-being or flourishing of a human or of the human’s ability to flourish. It is here that I argue each runs into difficulties applying its conception of flourishing to human beings who suffer loss of physical or mental capacities, even when that loss is the result of normal human aging. I believe each theory founders when confronted with the fact of human aging and the diminution of capacities that goes with that aging. Certainly what it means to live life changes as we grow older and many aspects of our lives can be characterized as “diminished.” But if those changes are part of the natural process of aging, they are a natural part of human life.

## II. ARISTOTLE'S VIRTUE ETHICS AND AGING

### *Aristotle's View of Aging*

A cursory reading of Aristotle can lead to an initial impression that he has a pessimistic view of aging and the aged:

Aristotle saw the elderly as filled with faults -- he believed that they were rigid, small minded, suspicious, cynical, ungenerous, cowardly, and shameless. They survive by shrewdness and calculation rather than through decency and moral values. They may seem self-controlled, but this is only because they do not have the physical power to generate emotional feelings (Hampton and Russell 2006).<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, a literal reading of Aristotle's corpus will yield words, phrases, sentences and entire paragraphs that convey this view of the elderly. However, there are two points that must be made before we proceed:

1. Aristotle often approaches a topic as a scientist, making and reporting observations and certain conclusions that he drew from those observations. His expression of observations as a composite of features of certain individual elderly persons does not necessarily reflect a blanket condemnation of the elderly in terms of his ethical theory. Irwin notes, "Aristotle associates the

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<sup>14</sup> Hampton and Russell contrast this supposed Aristotelian view with that of Cicero. In this regard they note:

His principle defense against such views was that age is really superior to youth because it is a time of spiritual growth. Age, he argued, is greater than youth because it stands above the trivial pursuit of pleasure typical of the early years of life.

In Cicero's words:

There is a fixed course for life's span and a simple path ... for Nature. A fitting timeliness has been allotted for each part of the journey, so that the helpless dependency of infancy and the fiery intensity of youth, the dignity of the established years, and the maturity of old age have each a certain natural endowment, which must be perceived and fulfilled in its own season.

If we accept Cicero's concept of life, each stage of life is viewed as having 'its own unique qualities and excellent features, and therefore that late life is in no way inferior to early life.'  
( Hampton and Russell 2006.)

different periods of a person's life with different traits of character, and hence with *tendencies* to virtue and vice; hence the young and the old have their contrasting traits"<sup>15</sup> [Emphasis added.] (Irwin 1999:354). Regardless of what tendencies elderly people have in general, it may be possible for individual elderly people to live well.<sup>16</sup> The fact that elderly people are, in general, rigid does not in itself preclude individual elderly persons from being flexible.

2. If one scours Aristotle's works for his comments about the general mass of humans at any age, the results would likely be similar. There is little doubt that Aristotle considers there to be few individuals capable of completing a well-lived life. In *Nicomachean Ethics* he refers to "the many, the most vulgar" who "conceive the good and happiness as pleasure ... In this they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals" (*NE* I.4 1095b18-21). Indeed, Aristotle repeatedly limits those who can lead a good life, or even be a suitable student of the study of a good life (for example, *N.E.* I.4 1095a1-11) to those who are brought up well (*NE* I. 4 1095b5-13), have the proper maturity (*NE* I.3 1095a1-11), and a certain level of good fortune – "an adequate supply of external goods (*NE* I.10 1101a15-22)."

Thus, whether Aristotle's ethical theory can accommodate an optimistic view of aging requires further examination. The approach taken in here in Part II is two-fold: (1) a detailed examination of Aristotle's account of a happy (flourishing) person, i.e., of the "good life" in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to establish a working theory on Aristotle's position regarding the "Pinetop /Taylor" distinction advocated in this paper and (2) an overview of Aristotle's comments on aging persons occurring in other of Aristotle's works with an eye towards determining whether

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<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., "Ungenerosity, however, is incurable, since old age and every incapacity seem to make people ungenerous." (*NE* IV.1 1121b14. )

<sup>16</sup> It is likely that Hampton and Russell have gleaned their characterization of Aristotle's view of the aged primarily from *Rhetoric* II.12, discussed later in this paper.

those comments support, undercut, or have no significant implications for the issue here presented.

### *Aristotle's Account of the "Good Life"*

Aristotle begins his account of the good life by establishing some basic ideas about what is "good." He notes that some goods are viewed as good as instruments to another end, some goods are both instrumental and ends in themselves, and some are seen as ends only (*NE* I. 6 1096a11 et. seq.). The last are the most complete and the subject of his inquiry (*NE* I.7 1097a27-30). He seeks the highest or most complete good(s) for humans. This, he concludes, is "happiness" (*eudaimonia*).

As noted above, happiness means different things to different people. Aristotle argues that the best conception of happiness is connected to the "function of a human being." This is established in *Nicomachean Ethics* through two analogies: (1) just as a flutist, sculptor, etc., has a function and is judged as doing well by how well he fulfills that function and (2) just as each part of a human – eye, hand, foot, has a function that is judged as doing well, a human being has a function and living well can be judged by how well that function is fulfilled<sup>17</sup> (*NE* I.7 1097b24-34). That function must be one not shared with plants or animals if it is to be distinctly human. (*NE* I.7 1097b34-1098a2). Because the actualization of a good thing is better (more complete) than the mere capacity or ability to do a good thing,<sup>18</sup> human function is "activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason" (*NE* I. 7 1098a6-7). The well-lived life, that lived by a

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<sup>17</sup> The justification by analogy is not extremely convincing. However, it is generally thought Aristotle here simply assumes that the reader has already read, understood, and accepts his *Physics* and *De Anima*. Skultety, Steven, *Lecture Notes*, February 27, 2012. The strength of the argument on this point is not important to our discussion and will not be explored here.

<sup>18</sup> Certainly understanding and acceptance of this point requires more than is given in *Nicomachean Ethics*. As with his justification discussed in note 17, an understanding of the underlying conceptions must be gleaned from others works in Aristotle's corpus, primarily his *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

flourishing human, is one that does this activity, i.e., fulfills the function, well (*NE* I.7 1098a13-14).

Activity and action here should not be taken literally in the modern sense, i.e., behavior requiring a strong or athletic man's physical resources to accomplish. Activity is after all, "activity of the soul."<sup>19</sup> "Knowing," for example, is an activity. However, the idea is that a flourishing life, one that is well-lived, must include not just the capacity for fulfilling the human function, but the actualization of that function.<sup>20</sup> While it can be argued that in the *Eudemian Ethics* as in *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle "eventually settles for an unequivocally intellectualistic, *perhaps even spiritualistic* answer: the ergon of man is to engage in contemplation, theoria-philosophic wisdom in its purest or most rarefied form" [Emphasis in original] (Wilkes 1978: 556), it does seem clear that Aristotle does not intend to restrict the good life to one *solely* of rational deliberation to the exclusion of "the exercise of those capacities that we share with other animals" (Nussbaum 1978: 106).

Since actualization of that function must occur as a citizen active in the *polis*, it may appear that there is some justification for a more literal view of "activity." When dealing with this issue in his *Politics*, Aristotle does state, "Goodness by itself is not enough: there must also be a capacity for being active in doing good" (*Pol* VII. 3 1325a31).<sup>21</sup> He goes on to reason that if

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<sup>19</sup>As argued below, this may be where contemporary virtue ethicists "go wrong," i.e., their vision of performing the human function well requires too much activity in a more literal sense than intended by Aristotle. Hurka's *Perfectionism* (Hurka 1993) and Kraut's *What is Good and Why* (Kraut 2007) are particularly susceptible to this criticism. Talbot Brewer begins "The Retrieval of Ethics" by noting a "prejudice" in favor of a "world making" view of ethics (Brewer 2009: 12-36), but grounds his "good life" in a "character friendship" that is itself quite robust.

<sup>20</sup> It is in this respect that Adam's account is most suspect (Adams 1999:224). *See* n. 5 *supra*. It does recognize that we are born and die helpless, and by implication that there is generally an increase in helplessness as we age, but seems to suggest that simply acknowledging this fact, accepting it without whining, is sufficient to constitute living well.

<sup>21</sup> References to the *Politics* in this section use to Barker's 1970 translation.



happiness is held to consist in “well-*doing*,” then a life of action is best. However, action even in this political context does not necessarily require outward acts:

But the life of action need not be, as is sometimes thought, a life which involved relations to others. Nor should our thoughts be held to be active only when they are directed to objects which have to be achieved by action. Thoughts with no object beyond themselves, and speculations and trains of reflection followed purely for their own sake, are far more deserving of the name of active (*Pol* VII.3 1325b16-22).

Aristotle goes two steps further. First, a function is completed well by being completed in accord with the proper virtue (*NE* 1.7 1098a15-16). Second, and in many respects more important for this discussion, the activity must be “in a complete life.” It is this requirement that the activity takes place in a complete life that most calls into question whether the elderly can engage in the proper activity of soul given the natural aging process. Since over the course of a life a person is subjected to suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, analysis of Aristotle’s meaning here requires analysis of three aspects of his proposition: complete life, fortune, and virtuous activity. The three cannot be completely separated for purposes of analysis as their roles are inextricably intertwined. Each is explained only with reference to the other. Nevertheless, I begin here with a look at the meaning of virtuous activity and then proceed to the role of a complete life and fortune in determining a good life.

### *Living Well Through Being Virtuous*

Living well through being virtuous is not at all easy in Aristotle’s view. Being virtuous, first of all, is not just a matter of doing virtuous acts. While Aristotle does speak of acts in his discussion of each of the virtues, his focus is not exclusively on the acts performed. Indeed, mere acts can and often are simply pretext. Bravery, for example, is not just performing a brave act, i.e., standing firm in the face of resistible fear, but standing firm “in the right way” (*NE* III.7 1115b13). Additionally, a brave person “stands firm against the right things and fears the right

things, for the right end, in the right way, at the right time” (*NE* III.7 1115b17-18). Similarly, a person acts with virtue regarding anger when she is “angry at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time” (*NE* IV.5 1125b33).

An essential addition to the criteria for an activity to be virtuous is that it must be “in accord with the state of character” (*NE* III.7 1115b20). Thus, for example, doing a brave act to avoid dishonor rather than doing it simply because one is brave and it is a brave act, is not genuine bravery (*NE* III.8 1116a26-29). Similarly, he notes that a temperate person likes pleasures as much as they are worth because it is the temperate person’s character to do so (*NE* III.11 1119a20).

Virtuous activity need not even be an act. When pointing out that virtue is within our power, Aristotle states, “Hence virtue is up to us, and so also, in the same way, is vice. For when acting is up to us, so is not acting, and when no is up to us, so is yes. And so if acting, when it is fine, is up to us, not acting, when it is shameful, is also up to us: and if not acting, when it is fine, is up to us, then acting, when it is shameful, is also up to us (*NE* III.5 1113b7-12). In the end, it may be said that Aristotle is not as interested in the acts<sup>22</sup> themselves as he is in the character from which the acts emanate and the “aim”<sup>23</sup> of the acts. One cannot do virtuous acts as a pretext and be virtuous. One acts or refrains from acting in a virtuous way by acting in accord with what reason prescribes (*See, e.g., NE* III.12 1119b15-19).

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<sup>22</sup> Aristotle’s discussion of justice is different in this respect, but much of what he says about justice seems out of sync with what he says about other virtues. Irwin notes, “In the case of the other virtues, the property of being intermediate belongs to the state of the virtuous person, not to the corresponding activities. In the case of justice, this property belongs to the activities. In pointing out this difference, Aristotle does not deny that the state of character which is justice is a mean in the ordinary sense...” (Irwin 1999:233).

<sup>23</sup> Here I am using “aim” in a quite expansive sense, covering not only the “end” sought by the activity, but all of the qualifications placed on virtuous activity by Aristotle, i.e., the right time, right amount, right reason, etc.

We must perform the right activities only because these deploy corresponding states of character (*NE* II.1 1103b25). Attaining such a state of character in the first place is also not easy. Aristotle states, “Virtue, then, is of two sorts, virtue of thought and virtue of character. Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching; that is why it needs experience and time. Virtue of character ( i.e., of *ethos*) results from habit; hence its name ‘ethical,’ slightly varied from ‘ethos’” (*NE* II.1 1103a15-18). A good life consists of acting from a firm and stable disposition using right reason. The goal is not to maximize anything, but to act from a certain character in a well thought out way.

The important point here, for my purposes, is that once the proper character has been achieved, “every virtue causes its possessor to be in a good state and to perform their functions well” (*NE* II.2 1104a34-1104b2). Thus, once a person has attained virtue, that person maintains it and leads a good life unless something happens to knock that person out of the character state. The issue then becomes whether the normal process of aging in and of itself automatically provides the push to knock the person off track.

### *The Role of a Complete Life in Determining a Good Life*

The idea that one should not measure whether one has lived a good life by choosing a particular point, points, or section of that life appears sound. Aristotle does appear correct when he states,

Human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete. But we must add ‘in complete life.’ For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make blessed and happy (*NE* I.7 1098a20).

This idea is widely held across time. Montaigne begins his sixteenth century essay, “That our happiness must not be judged until after our death,” with a quote from sixth century Solon, “Call

no man happy till he dies” (Blakewell 2010:35). Aristotle argues that whether a man actually lived well ought not to depend on how he is remembered or to any significant degree by what happens after his death<sup>24</sup> (*NE* I.11 1101a22-1101b9). There is merit to the idea that since all people age and die, a component of determining whether they have lived a good life, including whether they have flourished, ought to be the manner in which they aged and died. Thus, Aristotle notes that if someone has suffered the sorts of misfortunes suffered by Priam as told in the Trojan stories, and comes to a miserable end, no one counts him happy (*NE* I.9 1100a6-9). This, and the examples of aged persons he discusses in Book I, Chapters 10 and 11, however, seem to confirm that it is misfortunes outside the normal changes associated with aging, that is those of the sort that afflicted Priam, that count against flourishing.<sup>25</sup>

### *The Role of Fortune in a Complete Life.*

While fortune is, to an extent, subject to luck, Aristotle is not making a direct connection between a well-lived life and mere chance. He is clear that “fortune” here is wide ranging, including not only resources such as wealth, but family, friends, and political power (*NE* I.8 1099b1). Deprivation of certain external factors such as good birth, good children, and beauty “mars our blessedness” (*NE* I.8 1099b2-4). Yet, even looking “utterly repulsive” does not act as

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<sup>24</sup> Hurka takes a contrary view. Using an explanatory rather than advocacy tone he describes views of perfectionism (success views) in this way, “In success perfectionism, a person’s excellence may be reduced by bad luck not just now but in the future, including at times after his death.” For example, if a poet writes a poem intending that it be published but dies before submitting it for publication, the excellence in the poet’s life will be more or less depending on whether it is published after the poet’s death (Hurka 1993:111). Hurka does not expressly adopt this point, but ultimately states a preference for a “deserved success” view of perfectionism, i.e., a view that includes this position (Hurka 1993:112).

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle ends Book I, Chapter 10, by asking, “Then why not say that the happy person is the one whose activities accord with complete virtue, with an adequate supply of external good, not for just any time but for a complete life? Or should we add that he will also go on living this way and will come to an appropriate end, since the future is not apparent to us, and we take happiness to be the end, and altogether complete in every way” (*N.E.* I.10 1101a15-19). There is some controversy regarding the answers to these questions, part of which rests in issues of punctuation. Irwin concludes that answering “No” to the second question fits the argument of the chapter better (Irwin 1999:190). His translation of Aristotle’s response to the two questions Aristotle poses is, “Given these facts, we shall say that a living person who has, and will keep, the goods we mentioned is blessed, *but blessed as a human being is*” (*N.E.* I.10 1101a19-22). (Emphasis added.)

a complete bar to happiness, although it does mean “we do not altogether have the character of happiness” (*NE* I.8 1099b5). However, happiness is not a matter of pure chance, luck, or even a gift from the gods (*NE* I.9 1099b15-25).

At times Aristotle seems to speak from the framework of Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs.” While a human cannot flourish without sufficient food to maintain health, sufficient security to remain safe, sufficient leisure to engage in the study and habituation needed to act according to virtue, so happiness requires at least this amount of fortune as a prerequisite<sup>26</sup> (*NE* I.9 1099b6-7). Yet, Aristotle recognizes that *assessment* (at least) of a good life, “needs a complete life because life includes many reversals of fortune, good and bad” (*NE* I.9 1200a6).

This recognition that a “blessed” person’s life is subject to “strokes of good or ill fortune” throughout its course (*NE* I.10 1100b24) bodes well for the incorporation of the distinction urged in this paper into Aristotle’s overall theory of ethics. Once endowed with the proper character and thus blessed with a good life, it is possible for the complete life to be considered blessed even when the person suffers many major misfortunes “whenever someone bears many severe misfortunes with good temper, not because he feels no distress, but because he is noble and magnanimous” (*NE* I.10 1100b 30-32). Aristotle acknowledges that a person who suffers many major misfortunes can become oppressed by them and these can “spoil his blessedness” (*NE* I.10 1100b28-19). However, whether one lives a good life is not necessarily conditioned upon that life being free of misfortune, including the misfortunes that naturally attend aging. Aristotle states, “But surely it is quite wrong to take our cue from someone’s fortunes. For his doing well or badly does not rest on them. A human life, as we said, needs these added, but activities in accord with virtue control happiness, and the contrary activities control its contrary” (*NE* I.10

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<sup>26</sup> The need for friends, family, and progeny is also clear, but this discussion is not the place to develop their role fully.

110b7-10). Rather, a good life is conditioned upon the character of the person living it, not the misfortunes that attend it: “[A] truly good and prudent person, we suppose, will bear strokes of fortune suitably, and from his resources at any time will do the finest actions, just as a general will make the best use of his forces in war, and a good shoemaker will make the finest shoe from the hides given to him, and similarly for all other craftsmen”<sup>27</sup> (NE I.10 1101a1-5).

### *Acquiring Virtuous Character*

The character required to live the virtuous life is not innate to humans, but must be built up through habituation after having been instilled through education (NE I.4 1095b5-9). Thus, one needs the good fortune to be brought up by a fine family that can provide the necessary education and the good fortune that allows one to habituate in accordance with virtue. It appears that it is at this stage where virtue is instilled in a person that good mental and physical health is most crucial.

The development of the character states for each of the virtues takes time and has certain pre-conditions such as maturity, upbringing, and education as discussed above. The process of that development is a dialectical one. A properly brought up person performs virtuous acts, i.e., temperate acts, brave acts, generous acts, in order to become temperate and brave through habituation.<sup>28</sup> Once we become brave or temperate, our state of character makes us act bravely or temperately. Aristotle states, “for abstaining from pleasures makes us become temperate, and

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<sup>27</sup> This requirement that a person “make the best use” of whatever is dealt to her in life seems fundamentally different from simply accepting one’s helplessness as a human being and bearing up well as suggested by Adams, (Adams 1999: 224) (*See n. 5 supra*) but at the same time does not cross over to the “world making view” criticized by Brewer (Brewer 2009) (*See n. 19, supra*). There is a significant distinction between “world making” and making the best of the world as it presents itself to us.

<sup>28</sup> The relationship between being properly brought up, having a minimal level of goods, training, habituation, and other factors in developing the virtues and virtuous character is quite complex. In his *Politics* Aristotle states, “There are three means by which individuals become good and virtuous. These three means are the natural endowment we have at birth; the habits we form; and the rational principle within us.” (*Pol.* VII. xiii. 1332a 20) (McKeon 2001). However, it does appear clear that Aristotle does not intend the three means as three independent, alternative means each of which alone could result in goodness and virtue, but three components each of which is necessary to some degree.

once we have become temperate, we are most capable of abstaining from pleasures” (*NE* II.2 1104a34-1104b2). The opposite is also true, i.e., doing bad acts make us base and being base makes us do bad acts.

Once the habituation is acquired, a person engages out of habit in the (virtuous) activity of the soul in accord with reason and that activity in turn reinforces the habit.<sup>29</sup> Aristotle often speaks in terms of a human life consisting of youth, men in their prime, and the aged. He views these stages as part of a natural progression or arc of a human life. While youth are unable to acquire virtue during youth due to a lack of experience, teaching, and habituation, each (if properly brought up) can attain a virtuous character and engage in virtuous activity by acting from that character in accord with reason. As discussed above, the good life is conditioned upon being able to continue virtuous activity at each stage of life after virtuous character is attained, more or less regardless of what that life entails at any particular stage. This includes the later, aging stages, reached when a person is no longer in their prime.

Thus, we can conclude that Aristotle’s virtue ethics can and does accommodate the “Pinetop / Taylor” distinction urged in this paper. It appears that Aristotle’s ethics provides for – and even anticipates -- persons living good lives even as their physical and mental capacities are affected by normal aging processes, as long as they continue to act from a firm and stable disposition along with right reason.

#### *Aging in Other Works*

It is, of course, impossible to examine here every comment Aristotle makes on aging in his corpus. Instead, I will mention some comments that appear particularly relevant to this discussion.

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<sup>29</sup> “Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions” (*NE* II.1 1103b1). See also, *NE* II.2 in its entirety.

### *Biological Works*

In *On Youth, Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration*, Aristotle describes the existence of life as a matter of respiration's transfer of heat and refrigeration in a body. "Youth corresponds to the growth of the primary organ of refrigeration, old age to the wasting of this organ, while the interval between these two periods is the prime of life" (Ogle 1897: 100). It is difficult to apply this scientific observation of a physical process to his ethical theory except as already noted. The theory itself does not make a direct connection between these processes and the ability to live well. Aristotle's exclusion of the young from the ability to even study the good life is based on the fact that in youth a person "tends to follow his feeling" (*NE* I.4 1095a4), a propensity that can disqualify even a physically mature person if that person is incontinent (*NE* I.4 1095a8-9). However, Aristotle follows the passage above by making a distinction between violent and natural death that parallels the aging distinction urged in this paper. He states, "Death and decay when violent consist in the extinction or the exhaustion of the [vital] heat, either of which may cause dissolution. Natural death and natural decay consist in the exhaustion of this same heat, but only when such exhaustion is brought about by lapse of time and fulfillment of the natural term of life" (Ogle 1897:100).

Gotthelf notes in a quite different context than that discussed in this paper that Aristotle's biology raises a question as to "whether the decline to death that regularly follows development to maturity is to be seen as part of the *dunamis* which is actualized in maturity, or is rather to be attributed to the natures and potentials of the materials of which the organism is made" (Gotthelf 214n. 18). Of course, here we are less interested in this as a biological phenomenon than in the light it may shed on Aristotle's view of aging as it impinges upon the ability to live well.<sup>30</sup> Yet,

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<sup>30</sup> Gotthelf focuses on the implications of this for Aristotle's metaphysics, noting without accepting Nussbaum's essay analyzing *De Motu Animalium*, which focuses on the latter of the two alternatives.



Aristotle's metaphysics underlie and are inextricably intertwined with his ethics. His account of life as a continual process of growth and development proceeding towards the *logos* as an end-state providing a "unified account of adaptive behavior" (Nussbaum 1978: 76-80) seems to support rather than undercut our conclusion.

### *Rhetoric*

At first it can seem that Aristotle's comments on aging in the *Rhetoric* do not appear supportive of the working theory.<sup>31</sup> Aristotle does characterize Elder Men<sup>32</sup> using all the attributes suggested by the Hampton and Russell recitation:<sup>33</sup> cynical (*Rhetoric* II.13 1389b20);<sup>34</sup> small-minded (*Rhetoric* II.13 1389b24); cowardly (*Rhetoric* II.13 1389b29); and so on. He does so when considering the "various types of human character, in relation to the emotions and moral qualities, showing how they correspond to our various ages and fortunes" (*Rhetoric* II.13 1389b20). However, here he does not appear to be using "character" in the same sense as in *Nichomachean Ethics*. As argued above, there is good reason to believe that Aristotle was simply describing group tendencies rather than ascribing innate attributes here.

First, these statements are made in the context of the purpose of this particular work: understanding an orator's audience so that the orator can put the members of that audience "in the right frame of mind" (*Rhetoric* II.13 1377a23-24). Thus, he is equally critical of Youth (*Rhetoric* II.12 1388b32-1389b10) and the Gift of Fortune "Good Birth," of which he states, "Its effect on character is to make those who have it more ambitious" (*Rhetoric* II.15 1390b16).

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<sup>31</sup> I am indebted to Steven Skultety for directing me to some of the pertinent passages of the *Rhetoric* and the *Politics* discussed in this portion of this paper.

<sup>32</sup> For Aristotle "Elder Men" are those "past their prime." (*Rhetoric* II.13 1389b12). "The body is in its prime from thirty to five-and-third; the mind about forty-nine." (*Rhetoric* II.14 1390b10).

<sup>33</sup> See page 8 and note 14, *supra*.

<sup>34</sup> References to language in the *Rhetoric* are to McKeon 2001.

Second, he describes those in between Youth and Old Age, Men in their Prime, as being persons whose characteristics are between those of Youth and Old Age: “To put it generally, all the valuable qualities that youth and age divide between them are united in the prime of life, while all their excesses or defects are replaced by moderation and fitness” (*Rhetoric* II.13 1390b7-9). It is highly unlikely that Aristotle was actually contending that *all* men, either bodily or mentally in their prime, are endowed with these characteristics in such an ideal fashion. To do so would contradict many of his other works.

Finally, Aristotle notes in the *Nichomachean Ethics* that characteristics of a particular stage of life are not a matter of years. For example, “It does not matter whether he is young in years or immature in character, since the deficiency does not depend on age, but results from following his feelings in his life and in a given pursuit” (*NE* I.3 1095a6-9).

Thus while it cannot be denied that Aristotle’s view of Elder Men relative to Youth and Men in Their Prime as stated in the *Rhetoric* attributes to Elder Men as a group certain characteristics not supportive of our working theory, those comments are best regarded as having little or no effect on that theory rather than undercutting it.

### *Politics*

Aristotle’s explication of the role of the elderly in the *Politics* is perhaps of the most interest to this discussion because Aristotle identifies political science as the highest ruling science and the one that is best for the study of what is good for humans (*NE* I.2 1094a27-1094b13). In describing the ideal constitution, Aristotle notes that the role men play in the best form of government is limited to those who are neither mechanics nor tradesmen nor husbandmen, “since leisure is necessary both for the development of virtue and the performance

of political duties” (*Politics* VII.9 1328b34-1329a1).<sup>35</sup> For those in other classes such as warriors and councilors, “It remains therefore that both functions should be entrusted by the ideal constitution to the same person, not, however, at the same time, but in the order *prescribed by nature, who has given to young men strength and to older men wisdom*” [Emphasis added] (*Politics* VII.9 1329a12-15). Here Aristotle appears, however, to be referring to younger and older members of Men in Their Prime, rather than Elder Men. However, he goes on to ascribe the role of priesthood for “the old men of these two classes” (*Politics* VII.9 1328b34-1329a33). While he refers to priests as men who “from age have given up active life” (*Politics* VII.9 1328b34-1329a34) and the role of priests is largely ceremonial, it is clear that Aristotle views them as part of the governance of the *polis* and performing an important role.<sup>36</sup> This clearly suggests that he at once recognizes the effects of old age on men, e.g., they need a “rest provided in their service” (*Politics* VII.9 1328b34-1329a33), and the continued capacity of men in old age to contribute to the ideal constitution.<sup>37</sup> Yet, it equally clearly suggests that he sees a natural human “complete life” as having a kind of natural arc, where youth is followed by a prime age, then ends in old age.

### *Conclusion*

While contemporary virtue ethicists, including those who base their theories on Aristotle’s work, have difficulty incorporating aging as part of normal human life into their theories, this difficulty is not intrinsic to the nature of Aristotle’s theory of ethics. Examination of the theory itself in the *Nicomachean Ethics* indicates that his ethics can and does accommodate the distinction urged in this paper between the natural effects of aging and those of

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<sup>35</sup> References to *Politics* in this section are to McKeon’s 2001 translation.

<sup>36</sup> Priests are considered “Another [necessary] set of officers, along with “the chief political offices.” They “see” to the preservation and repair of the temples of the gods and to other matters of religion (*Politics* VI.8 1322b19-21).

<sup>37</sup> Those who continue to be blessed and live well are those who continue to actualize that capacity.

diseases and disorders. An overview of Aristotle on aging and the aged in his biological works, *Rhetoric*, and *Politics* when considered *in toto* supports the conclusion that Aristotle's ethics provides for – and even anticipates -- persons living good lives even as their physical and mental capacities are affected by normal aging processes. In essence, this is because Aristotle's conception of living well is one of a certain kind of human being regularly engaged in certain kinds of actions, and not a description of how many feats a person can accomplish.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Aristotle's theory and virtue ethics in general are often cast as being based on "*being virtuous* rather than *doing virtue*. I am indebted to Steven Skultety for this more accurate characterization.

### III. CONTEMPORARY VIRTUE ETHICS

#### *Categories of Contemporary Virtue Ethics Theories*

Contemporary Aristotelian virtue ethics can be roughly divided into four categories, each of which will be discussed in below:<sup>39</sup>

1. A third theory of right action espoused in Hursthouse's "Normative Virtue Ethics" defining moral rightness as acting from virtuous character (Bonjour 2007) and Philippa Foot's *Virtues and Vices*. (Foot 1978);
2. Virtue ethics as a "neglected consequentialism" exemplified in this paper by Hurka's *Perfectionism*. (Hurka 1993);
3. Virtue ethics as moral realism based on a conception of good as flourishing that applies in some senses to plants and well as members of the animal kingdom, here represented by Kraut's *What is Good and Why*. (Kraut 2007); and
4. Special action theories developed by McIntyre and recently expounded by Brewer in *The Retrieval of Ethics*. (Brewer 2009).

The purpose of my examination will be to determine whether each theory accommodates or can be modified to accommodate the conception of *eudaimonia* that properly accommodates the normal processes of aging, i.e., whether the theory can distinguish the good in the complete life of Pinetop Perkins from that of Elizabeth Taylor.

#### *Third Theory of Right Action*

Both utilitarianism and deontology are considered to be ethical theories designed to inform us of what the "right action" is to take in fairly specific circumstances: utilitarianism

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<sup>39</sup> Lecture notes from "Contemporary Virtue Ethics" class by Steven Skultety (2011).

through the provision of a rule or rules such as “Act so as to maximize happiness,” and deontology through maxims such as “Act in accordance with a correct moral rule or principle.” Neither of these approaches is entirely satisfactory to virtue ethicists because, *inter alia*, they do not recognize the special nature of man, focusing instead on moral rightness defined as maximization of happiness or rule obedience rather than on mankind itself.<sup>40</sup> Virtue ethics corrects that problem by focusing on what it is to “be good” as a human, rather than on “doing the right thing.” However, virtue ethics so conceived is subject to the objection that it does not provide any real guidance in determining what one ought to do in particular circumstances.

One category of contemporary virtue ethicists attempts to respond to that objection. Some respond by arguing that the entire notion of moral rightness is a red herring. Anscombe may have first raised this contention arguing:

[T]he concepts of obligation, and duty – *moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say – and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of ‘ought,’ ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivative from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it (Blackwell 1981:26).

Others, such as Hursthouse tout what is characterized as a “neo-Aristotelian” view which contends that virtue ethics provides an adequate account of which actions are right or wrong in particular situations, and that this account is at least as viable as utilitarianism and deontology. In *Normative Virtue Ethics*, for example, she points out that the basic utilitarian premise, “An action is right if and only if it promotes the best consequences,” is of little use in determining how to act in particular circumstances unless one adds the premise, “The best consequences are

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<sup>40</sup> Consequentialism and deontology are not incompatible with an analysis of virtue. For example, one could be a deontologist who also, in addition to a theory of right action, has a theory of virtue. However, on the whole the focus of such theories is right action rather than what it is to be good as a human. Anscombe contends, “Anyone who has read Aristotle’s *Ethics* and has also read modern moral philosophy must have been struck by the great contrasts between them. The concepts which are prominent among the moderns seem to be lacking, or at any rate buried or far in the background, in Aristotle” (Blackwell 1981:26). The reverse also appears to be true – the concepts which are so prominent for Aristotle seem to be lacking, or at any rate buried or far in the background, in modern moral philosophy.

those in which happiness is maximized.” Virtue ethics can, she contends at length, provide an equivalent amount of guidance if one adds to the basic virtue ethics premise, “An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances, the premise “A virtuous agent is one who acts virtuously, that is, one who has and exercises the virtues,” combined with an explanation of what a virtue is (Bonjour and Baker 2007:406).<sup>41</sup>

In general, ethicists in this category, especially those that espouse normative virtue ethics, i.e., virtue ethics that provides an account of right action equivalent to the accounts of the rival ethical theories, do not modify those aspects of Aristotle’s theory under consideration in this paper. This group focuses on applying or developing Aristotle’s concepts in a way that suggests, if not directs, “right action” rather than on creating a new ethical theory based on concepts fundamental to Aristotle’s theories. At times they differ in interpretation of Aristotle’s statements, but they do not alter his theory in a way that affects its ability to accommodate the “Pinetop / Taylor” distinction. Thus, they will not be discussed further here.

### *Neglected Consequentialism*

In *Perfectionism*, Thomas Hurka describes perfectionism as being based on human nature. Since he is seeking the best or most defensible perfectionism, he begins by finding the “best concept of human nature” (Hurka, 1993:9). This concept is subject to two tests: (1) it must have “moral appeal,” and (2) it must have “intuitively plausible consequences.” (Hurka 1993:9) He rejects both the Platonic and the Aristotelian characterizations of human nature as equivalent to the properties distinctive of or possessed only by humans (Hurka 1993:10) in favor of equating human nature with the properties essential to humans as conditioned on their being living things (Hurka 1993:17). These properties, which Hurka describes as yielding an

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<sup>41</sup> Phillippa Foot gamely takes on the task of providing a thorough explanation of what a virtue is in “*Virtues and Vices*,” *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Oxford: Blackwell, 1978.

“Aristotelian theory of human nature,” are certain bodily essential properties and rationality. Combined with the perfectionist ideal, his theory, he states, yields an Aristotelian perfectionism with three values: physical perfection, and theoretical and practical rationality (Hurka 1993:37). Unlike Aristotle, Hurka does not place rationality ahead of physical qualities, but views the two as being equally required for a good life.<sup>42</sup>

Hurka notes the fact that perfectionism, at least in some forms, can lead to the conclusion that lives ought to be terminated before their natural end to avoid the consequences of aging to a “good life.” This is primarily because his theory requires the maximization of perfectionism throughout life. He asserts that this is in accord with Aristotle’s requirement that a good life must be good over a complete life. However, as discussed in Part II, Aristotle either was not a maximizing consequentialist at all or would view such maximization in the context of the various stages of life. For example, Aristotle’s use of retired councilors as priests maximizes their role in the polis, but does so in the context of their ability to actualize their capacities *given their stage of life*.

Hurka, on the other hand, advocates a form of pure maximization. There are several approaches to aggregating perfection for purposes of calculating maximization. When discussing the averaging approach to aggregation of perfection in one’s life, he notes, “Xenophon reports that Socrates accepted death at his trial because he saw his mental powers were failing and did not want to live through an intellectual decline”(Hurka 1993:72). He further notes that some forms of measuring the maximization of perfection, especially averaging, can lead to the conclusion that there comes a point where the losses associated with aging are so damaging to perfection maximization that the life should be terminated, perhaps involuntarily (Hurka 1993:74). His way around this conclusion is unsatisfactory, noting that defenders of the view

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<sup>42</sup> Thus apparently eliminating, e.g., Stephen Hawking, from consideration.



“may say these implications will rarely be actual,” (Hurka 1993:74) and further noting that, “objections about killing are not unique to averaging perfectionism but confront consequentialist theories in general” (Hurka 1993:75) He suggests in the section on averaging that including perfectionism in a pluralist morality to avoid “disturbing implications for action,” (Hurka 1993:75) but in the end does not do so, resting on the conclusion that there is no single unobjectionable aggregative principle and restricting his theory to cases where, “we are not affecting the length or number of human lives”(Hurka 1993:83).

Hurka’s theory cannot be viewed as requiring anything less than perfection. However, humans are not perfect and perfectionism as espoused by Hurka clearly acknowledges this. We are to seek maximization of perfection, but must do so inevitably within the context of our human capacities. Hurka acknowledges this in his discussion of degrees of physical perfection. Noting that for Aristotle physical perfection comes in vigorous bodily activity with “the highest physical good in great athletic feats,” (Hurka 1993: 39) he goes on to acknowledge:

Most of us are not outstanding athletes and cannot achieve the highest physical perfection. Still, we can preserve our basic health and pursue whatever mild athletics are compatible with our main projects. We have instrumental reasons to do both these things. Physical activity keeps us alert and can be the medium for some exercise of rationality. If Aristotelian perfectionism is correct, however, this activity is also a modest intrinsic good, as the development of our physical nature (Hurka 1993: 39).

One can argue that the principle Hurka uses here can be extended to rational perfection, and then applied to the elderly as well as to the young, especially given that these changes do not suddenly come upon persons when they qualify for Social Security retirement benefits. While the comparison of a person’s attainment of perfection at age 60 may be diminished less when compared to her attainment at age 24, we can also compare two (or more) individuals at every stage of their lives and assert that one has attained more perfection at that stage.

The difficulty is that one cannot, when discussing Hurka's theory, set aside problems of aggregation for purposes of calculating maximization despite this begrudging accommodation Hurka makes for the normal deficiencies inherent in being human. Hurka's perfectionism does require maximization and maximization requires some method of aggregation. Hurka analyzes each of the aggregation methods and finds that each leads to a "repugnant conclusion." Ultimately he determines that there is no acceptable "single, simply acceptable principle," but that there are certain properties an acceptable principle must have, which leads him to conclude, "So in its general character it must be similar to summing, averaging, and the diminishing marginal value principle" (Hurka 1993: 83).

Yet even the diminishing marginal value principle, which minimizes the need to "want" an end to life due to diminished capacity to achieve perfection that arises under averaging,<sup>43</sup> concludes that for *even a normally aging person* "the value of an additional year in a life gets smaller the more years the life contains and diminishes asymptotically towards zero" (Hurka 1993: 73). Hurka asserts that a viable theory must cohere "with our intuitive moral judgments at all levels of generality" (Hurka 1993: 31). This requires that "the ideal has attractive consequences" (Hurka 1993: 31). The conclusion that Pinetop's final years were approaching zero in value merely due to the fact that his ability to achieve perfection was diminishing when compared to his earlier years, does not meet these criteria. We must conclude then that Hurka's version of virtue ethics cannot be modified to meet our objection and retain its essence.

### *Virtue Ethics as Moral Realism*

In *What is Good and Why*, Richard Kraut is less concerned with human nature. He asks what it means to say "G is good for a living S" and concludes that it means that G is a

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<sup>43</sup> "Given the long initial period of low perfection, averaging will not want a person's life to end when she first declines, but only later, when the perfection she can achieve in a year drops below the average for her life as a whole" (Hurka 1993: 73).

component of S's flourishing. Flourishing itself, according to Kraut consists of "developmentalism." For humans this does require some knowledge of the specific powers or faculties belonging to the human species. Like Hurka, Kraut identifies both physical and non-physical powers, but describes the pertinent non-physical powers as "psychological powers" -- cognitive, affective, sensory, and social. A flourishing human being is one who possesses, develops, and then enjoys the exercise of these developed powers.

The problem of aging is not the same for Kraut as for Hurka, since he is not arguing for the maximization of anything, including "flourishing." However, the loss of the powers associated with flourishing that occurs in aging is clearly bad for us as it diminishes our "well-being" as much as many psychiatric disorders (Kraut 2007:164). Kraut confirms this early in Chapter 3:

It is also part of our picture of the broad contours of human life that our powers decline as we age, and that this is a loss of well-being. A life that continues beyond a certain point will start to become worse for that person living it...The desires of an old person who has declined in this way might be rational, properly informed, and fully satisfied; nonetheless, the quality of his life has diminished, and to explain why we make this judgment we must appeal to a concrete conception of the powers we take it to be good for a person to exercise (and therefore bad to lose) (Kraut 2007:139).

There is some validity to this statement, but perhaps it paints with too broad a stroke. It is difficult to characterize *natural aging* and *natural death*, two universal aspects of human life, as being "bad for" humans.

Kraut may argue, as does Hurka, that while these aspects of life are universal to man, they are not essential properties that distinguish humans from other animals, (Hurka 1997:14) although awareness of aging and death may be such a property. However, the claim here is not that we should draw Hurka-like essential properties from our aging and death, but that insofar as

they are natural phenomena, the mere loss of powers due to them ought not to be considered “bad for us.” There seems to be some recognition of this in Section 45, where Kraut notes:

For example, if someone loses many of his cognitive, physical, and social capacities -- as sometimes happens in old age -- he is worse-off than he was before. But here is something remarkable: that comparative judgment about old age commits us to saying that a new-born baby does not yet have as good a life as he will come to have later if he develops properly and lives in favorable circumstances (Kraut 2007: 171).

According to Kraut, for the baby we conclude, “...he is doing well if he functions in the way that a normal baby should – even though that level is far below what is likely to be someday.” (*Id.*) However, Kraut does not appear to reverse this reasoning and conclude that the aged may also be doing well (flourishing) if they function in the way that a normal aged person should. Instead, he immediately moves on to direct same-state adult/adult comparisons.

Kraut could recognize this point without changing his conception of flourishing. If Kraut can bring himself around to viewing the functioning of the “normal” aged in the same light as he views that of a “normal” baby, then he might be able to incorporate the optimistic view of aging into his theory. In fact, at times Kraut seems to recognize the “Pinetop Perkins/Elizabeth Taylor” distinction I attempt to make in this paper. When discussing, for example, cognitive flourishing and un-flourishing he notes that “The absence or deterioration of basic mental competencies...is a loss. Psychiatric disorders are exactly that: disorders – bad for the person who suffers through them” (Kraut 2007: 164). He goes on to point out that the “mere possession and use of basic mental skills” is not non-instrumentally good, but taking pleasure in their use certainly is (Kraut 2007: 164). Certainly, one could maintain our distinction in this context, focusing on Pinetop’s

ability to take pleasure – to flourish – in his music<sup>44</sup> and other activities of his life and comparing it favorably to Elizabeth Taylor’s mere tolerance of her life of suffering.

However, Kraut’s theory does not allow this “friendly amendment.” While he strongly disparages the notion of human perfection as a basis for an ethical theory, his own “developmentalism” continues to focus on a requiring the possession and utilization of “powers, capacities, growth, flourishing (Kraut 2007: 136 fn 4)” in a way that continues to view “Anything that impedes that development or the exercise of those mature faculties – disease, the sapping of vigor and strength, injuries, the loss of organs -- is bad for them” (Kraut 2007: 131). He is not willing to cede our point that despite loss of some faculties, a Pinetop still flourished.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Kraut, while not necessarily condoning the concept that one should “want” life to end when our powers age, continues to insist, as quoted above, that “A life that continues beyond a certain point will start to become worse for the person living it” due to the fact that our powers “decline as we age” (Kraut 2007:137).

As noted by Steven Skultety,<sup>46</sup> the distinction I am suggesting needs to be made here may require temporally relative standards for judging flourishing, that is, standards that change with time providing different standards for different stages in life. This would entail the difficulty of providing criteria for determining flourishing that change over time as a person moves from one stage of life to another. However, as also noted by Skultety, this difficulty can be overcome if we do not insist upon viewing flourishing as if it were a single power or muscle that reaches a peak capacity at some time and then diminishes. Note, for example, that when athletes damage a

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<sup>44</sup> In a footnote discussing T. M. Scanlon’s notion of intrinsic value, Kraut agrees that “every life fails to respond to certain values,” and so one is not defective for not having curiosity regarding certain values, provided what he pursues is worthwhile.” *Id.* at 166, fn.22.

<sup>45</sup> “[I]f you say of a human being that he is flourishing, your statement is thrown into doubt if he is correctly described either as *psychologically* or as *physically* unhealthy, weak, damaged, and stunted.” (Kraut 2007: 133)

<sup>46</sup> Instructor comments to Phil 616-2/619 Paper One by R. E. Mongue.

muscle or tendon, they frequently compensate for that damage through physical therapy that trains another muscle to take over the function of the damaged part, often returning to the field a better athlete than before.<sup>47</sup>

There appears to be nothing in Kraut's formulation of flourishing that *requires* using unchanging criteria for flourishing. In fact, his comments about a normal baby indicate the criteria do in some sense change during the development from the "baby" to the "adult" stage of life. Further, the difficulty of determining criteria is not insuperable. It is not a sufficient objection that making this accommodation multiplies that inherent difficulty only in degree rather than kind if that increased difficulty is needed to avoid tossing Pinetop Perkins' final decades into the fires of Gehenna. However, it is clear that Kraut does impose the demand that whatever criteria are used be based on an *increased* (or at least non-diminished) capacity to exercise the powers we see inchoate in a baby. Thus, it appears that Kraut's theory also cannot be modified in a way that will accept our distinction and retain its essence.

For Aristotle, one needed a fair amount of advantage in life – wealth, health, leisure, and so on – to flourish. Much of this advantage could be attributed to luck. However, whether we age is not a matter of luck or advantage – we all will do it unless unlucky enough to be struck down before we age. Kraut is wrong in saying loss of cognitive, physical, and social capacities sometimes happens in old age, as it happens to one degree or another universally. Viewing all loss of powers attributed to aging as "bad" or "bad for us," leads to a view of aging that relegates

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<sup>47</sup> "The goal of physical therapy is to improve the function of the muscles that surround the shoulder. Most people, athletes and weight-lifters included, only strengthen a few of the large muscles around the shoulder. Physical therapy targets the smaller, but important muscles around the shoulder that are commonly neglected. By strengthening these muscles, therapy can help compensate for damaged tendons and improve the mechanics of the shoulder joint." Jonathan Cluett, M.D., "How does physical therapy help a rotator cuff tear?" *Orthopedics*, <http://orthopedics.about.com/od/rotatorcuff/f/therapy.htm>. (Last accessed March 23, 2011.)

the aged to being “defective” and incapable of functioning well, something to be feared and regretted.

### *Virtue Ethics as Dialectical Activity*

Talbot Brewer may provide a vehicle by which virtue ethics can make the shift to the necessary temporally relative criteria in *The Retrieval of Ethics*. Brewer posits two ways of looking at desire and agency, i.e., acting on desire, (1) a world-making concept of agency supported by three “dogmas of desire” underpinning a “propositionalist” conception of desire, and (2) a “dialectical” concept. The first views desire as the object of a proposition such that one acts to make the desired object or state of affairs occur in the world. This view, according to Brewer, does not adequately handle activities in which one engages for their own sake such as philosophy.

The key to the distinction Brewer is making is the difference between “making” and “engaging.” He states, “Desires to engage in dialectical activities are quite literally desires for these activities, conceived in light of their constitutive ideals and internal goods” (Brewer 2009:46). He points to the desire to engage in the activity as opposed to being a desire to change the world in such a way as to make it the case that we are engaged in the activity. It does seem right that some activities, such as engaging in philosophy, music, love, friendship, and the like are about the activity (or the intrinsic good of the activity) rather than an object, and are entered into without “a full understanding of what the activity calls for” (Brewer 2009:39). Thus we cannot “desire to” love or philosophize, but have a “desire for” them. This allows us to provide rationalization and reasons for engaging in such activities not available to propositionalists. Brewer seems correct when he notes that such dialectical activities are a familiar part of almost any human life.

The value of this view is that it appears to be heading in a direction that allows for reconciliation of virtue ethics and aging. Indeed, it is likely that the “world-making” or “need to produce” view of desire lies at the root of the pessimistic view of aging embedded in the previous views of virtue ethics: our ability to change the external world does diminish as we age. If flourishing can consist of “wholehearted engagement”(Brewer 2009:46) in an activity such as “falling in love, or kindling a friendship” and the like, then flourishing remains possible for each of us as we age in a way that cannot be possible if flourishing is measured by our continued ability to leap tall buildings (physically and mentally) in a single bound. Indeed, aging, if conceived correctly, can actually contribute to living well in that it embraces the “intuitively appealing notion of wisdom... as informed by continuous progression towards a deeper and more illuminating sense of how best to live” (Brewer 2009:189).

There is some language in Brewer that may appear to contradict this accommodation of aging. For example, he does state, “In my view, we should follow Aristotle in holding that a good character is necessary but not remotely sufficient for an ideally good life. Such a life requires many other goods, including health, fulfilling loves and friendships, engagement with the arts and sciences, and the good fortune not to be laid low by oppression, abuse, hunger, or physical or psychological illness...without such good fortune, a good character cannot express itself in a full life of valuable activities” (Brewer 2009:213). However, to the extent that Brewer is adopting Aristotle here, his language is subject to the same interpretation as set forth in discussing Aristotle himself.

Brewer’s view of dialectical activity is too robust for our purposes, however. We can see this best in his extensive discussion of friendship. Brewer distinguishes sharply between “pleasure friendships” and “character friendships.” The former are friendships that are carried on



as a matter of utility, each friend providing the means to some form of pleasure. Character friendship, on the other hand, is intrinsically valuable as a dialectical relationship “between the attainment of virtue and participation in these particularly valuable sorts of human relationships” (Brewer 2009:240).

Brewer accepts Aristotle’s premise that practical wisdom is not codifiable, that moral excellence in practical thinking cannot be captured in principles of the sort that “would tell us which actions are required and which are forbidden in which circumstances” (Brewer 2009:238). Thus, Brewer asserts, “The Aristotelian must ... provide an alternative account of the genesis of mutually affirmable patterns of social cooperation – one that explains how an uncodifiable moral outlook can come to be shared” (Brewer 2009:238). Brewer posits character friendship as the basis for (or at least an example of) that alternative account.

Character friendship is one in which the friends confirm each other’s “evaluative outlook.” This friendship requires a particular type of person that can be counted as “good.” “A relation can be grounded in genuine agreement about the good only if the parties to it seek to discern and act in the name of objective goods” (Brewer 2009:248). While clearly distinguishable from a pleasure friendship, Brewer’s description of this type of friendship makes it seem almost unattainable as a dialectical activity, i.e., one that requires too much work to be enjoyable for its own sake. “Engagement in an ideal character friendship, then, somewhat surprisingly implies attainment of the standard of universal self-affirmability. It requires, in other words, that one be able to affirm all manifestations of one’s own outlook as objectively good” (Brewer 2009:250).

It is almost that in order to cultivate virtue one must not only engage in friendship as a dialectical activity, but be aware that one is so engaged and *strive* to be so engaged. It is *only*

once the friendships “arise in something approaching their proper form, they are valuable not only for their immediate delights but also for their beneficial influence on one’s character and on one’s prospects for happiness” (Brewer 2009:240) This seems too harsh and leaves me feeling tired, thinking, “Hey, man, I just want to *be* friends.”

Rosilind Hursthouse makes a related point in “Aristotle for Women Who Love Too Much:”

Brewer thus sets up a rather stark opposition, between pleasure and utility friends, on the one hand, who do not wish the other well “for his own sake” at all, but only with a view to their own benefit, and character friends, on the other, who do wish each other well for the other’s own sake and hence have mutual goodwill. But he does not consider the interesting interpretation favored by Price, which offers something less stark. According to Price, in all three forms of friendship, “the parties wish one another well in the way in which they love one another, this being either for the other’s own sake, or in a way that bears enough resemblance to wishing another well for his sake.” (Hursthouse 2007:331).

My point is that there seems to be a third type of friendship that may entail intrinsic value and “beneficial influence on one’s character and on one’s prospects for happiness,” especially for the aged.<sup>48</sup> In essence, while virtue friendship is different from pleasure/use friendship, it need not be exhaustive and tiring. It may consist of “silently sharing the same fears.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> I look not to Price to depict that third type, but to Simon and Garfunkel:

Old friends, old friends sit on their park bench like bookends  
A newspaper blowin' through the grass  
Falls on the round toes of the high shoes of the old friends

Old friends, winter companions, the old men  
Lost in their overcoats, waiting for the sun  
The sounds of the city sifting through trees  
Settles like dust on the shoulders of the old friends

Can you imagine us years from today, sharing a park bench quietly  
How terribly strange to be seventy  
Old friends, memory brushes the same years,  
Silently sharing the same fears

Simon and Garfunkel, “Old Friends,” *Bookends* (LP: Columbia KCL-2729 [mono]/KCS 9529 [stereo], 1968.)

<sup>49</sup> I am indebted to Steven Skultety for assistance in articulating this point.

An objection may be raised that the robustness of Brewer's character friendship is insufficient reason to dismiss his entire theory. Might we be able simply to excise character friendship from what otherwise seems to be an accommodating theory? This is not possible. First, too much of what Brewer seeks to accomplish depends on character friendship. It is the beginning of a way to "retrieve a recognizably Aristotelian view that is capable of meeting "a nest of challenges," including addressing the questions of whether anything sensible can be done under the heading of moral theorizing and whether we can understand ourselves as engaged in moral theorizing (Brewer 2009:238). It also provides a route to the cultivation of virtue itself, since we cannot "learn to be good by memorizing and committing ourselves to some list of practical principles" (Brewer 2009:253).

Second, character friendship for Brewer is indicative of the dialectical activity that is part of attaining and maintaining all virtues, i.e., is at the core of his entire theory. A flourishing life is constituted by acting from all of the virtues, each of which involves the same robustness. Brewer moves from "world-making" to one based on his concept of dialectical activity stating Aristotle "did not ground value in the virtues of character themselves, but rather in the intrinsically valuable activity that flows from the virtues under minimally propitious conditions" (Brewer 2009:92). He focuses on his assertion that "It is Aristotle's view, after all, that the highest human good lies in sustained activity – and in passive experiences ... not in achieved states of character" (Brewer 2009:92).

While there is some basis in this characterization of Aristotle, as noted above, Brewer pushes it beyond that necessary and beyond its ability to accommodate the "Pinetop/Taylor" distinction. He characterizes, for example, a parent/child conversation as "guided by a *continuous straining* to see and to actualize the highest possibilities latent in the unfolding

conversation – and, more generally, in parent-child relations.”<sup>50</sup> [Emphasis added.] (Brewer 2009:92). The extreme intensity of such a friendship would fall beyond the capacities of *both* Pinetop and Taylor, thus not registering the difference between them.

Thus, as his theory is posited by Brewer, it too fails to adequately accommodate the normal aging process. However, if it is properly grounded in Aristotle, as discussed in Part III, it could provide the necessary accommodation.

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<sup>50</sup> The context of the conversation itself is one of attempting to reach a “teenage child who has become withdrawn, very nearly estranged from the family.” (Brewer 2009:91). In that context “continuous straining” is appropriate and necessary. It is the extension to parent-child relations and dialectical activity in general that cannot realistically accommodate later stages of life.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Since contemporary virtue ethics approaches seem to fail in accommodating the natural human aging process and the distinction between Pinetop Perkins and Elizabeth Taylor, where can we turn for an ethical philosophy based on human flourishing that will not fail? One option is to try to develop a neo-Platonic approach rather than the neo-Aristotelian approaches discussed in Part III. Another is to properly ground contemporary theories in Aristotle's thought.

##### *Option One: God as the Good*

The first option is attempted by Adams in *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Adams 1999). His theory rests upon a non-Aristotelian concept of good, one that is both theistic and Platonic in nature, although the theorist does not claim it represents Plato's thoughts.<sup>51</sup> Adams does not accept well-being or what is good for a person as the good on which to base an ethical theory. Thus, his theory does not directly approach the conflict of being based on human nature while rejecting the natural process of human nature. However, an examination of his theory and some of the conclusions he reaches based on the supreme good as "excellence," which he identifies with God, are helpful for the purposes of understanding an acceptable approach to resolving that conflict. Although the theory itself is both complex and interesting, we are interested primarily in his brief comments on helplessness, so the theory will only be sketched out here.

In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Adams sets out a structure for ethics that is organized around a transcendent Good and its relation to the many finite goods of our experience. He begins with an analysis of Plato's concept of a transcendent Good, noting specifically that it is

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<sup>51</sup> Adams states, "Although some of what I will say could be read as interpretation of Plato, I do not mean to discuss, except occasionally and incidentally, whether it accurately represents beliefs that Plato held" (Adams 1999: 14).

not well-being and not usefulness, “It is rather the goodness of that which is worthy of love or admiration” (Adams 1999:13). The two primary tenets of his theory are the central role of the Good in ethics and the transcendence of the infinite Good defined as “excellence,” which Adams equates with God.

While the good for Adams is not well-being, Adams is not without concern for well-being. His theory, he states, gives a primary place to excellence: “the type of goodness exemplified by the beauty of a sunset, a painting, or a mathematical proof, or by the greatness of a novel, the nobility of an unselfish, ... goodness of that which is worthy of love or admiration, honor or worship, rather than the good (for herself) that is possessed by one who is fortunate or happy, as such (though happiness may also be excellent, and worth of admiration)”<sup>52</sup> (Adams 1999:83). Yet, he devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of “Well-being and Excellence,” (Adams 1999:83-128) concluding that human well-being and the value of persons as persons are best understood in terms of excellence. It is a later comment made by Adams on well-being in the sense of living well that is of particular interest in the context of this paper. Ethics is not only about how to act well, but more broadly about how to *live* well:

And whether we like it or not, helplessness is a large part of life. Human life both begins and ends in helplessness. Between infancy and death, moreover, we may find ourselves in the grip of a disease or a dictatorship to which we may be able to adapt but which we cannot conquer...Dealing well with our helplessness is therefore an important part of living well. An ethical theory that has nothing to say about this abandons us in what is literally the hour of our greatest need (Adams 1999:224).

This statement is made in the context of the importance of symbolic action in the face of goods and evils that we are relatively powerless to accomplish or prevent, but can be extrapolated to our present discussion.

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<sup>52</sup> All as aspects or reflections of God.

The statement is initially attractive. It clearly provides a basis on which a person can live well ethically despite the diminished capacities that come with aging, since it claims that a person can live well even when helpless by simply “dealing well” in the face of that helplessness. However, depending on how one cashes in the phrase “dealing well” it may swing too far in the direction opposite Hurka and Kraut, requiring too little of us. This is especially the case with a theistic theory that can recommend a perspective of “dealing well” with the difficulties of aging simply by having faith that all is as designed by God.

There is very little in Adams’ exposition of his theory that can flesh this out for us. While it is difficult to point to specific language indicating that Adams would approve of this rather lax view of “dealing well,” the general tenor of the rest of his book is inclined in that direction, especially his discussion of divine commands, autonomy, and moral faith. Indeed, Adams does state that to view the task of ethics as guidance for action alone is too narrow, implying that living well does not require action or activity at all<sup>53</sup>(Adams 1999:224). Nevertheless, extension of “living well” to the truly helpless seems to go too far. While some interpretations of Aristotle may seem to allow too few to live a good life, this extension is too susceptible to interpretation that allows essentially everyone not only to lead such a life, but to be living such a life with too little input of their own.

### *Option Two: Grounding in Aristotle*

While contemporary ethical theories have difficulties accommodating the natural process of aging in their theories, as argued in Part II the problem is not intrinsic to virtue ethics as

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<sup>53</sup> However, I am not entirely convinced that this is a fair reading of the theory when considered *in toto*. When, for example, Adams states “One of the most obvious answers [to the question of how the powerless deal with goods and evils they cannot accomplish or prevent] is that we can give more reality to our being for the goods and against the evils by expressing our loyalties symbolically in action (Adams 1999:224). He also focuses on personal responsibility in his discussion of autonomy (Adams 1999:272,) and his entire discussion of vocation as an “idea of what is my task in the universe” suggests activity rather than abdication in the face of helplessness.

envisioned by Aristotle. A close examination of Aristotle's theory indicates that even with the restrictions he puts on those who can achieve a good life, the theory makes the distinction urged here between Pinetop Perkins and Elizabeth Taylor and accommodates the natural decline that comes with aging.

Those theorists examined here who suffer most severely from the inability of their theories to make the accommodation are those that, in Talbot Brewer's terms, perceive the "activity" necessary for a good life as "world making" rather than dialectical. Brewer's theory, being based on dialectical activity, is subject to adaptation that could make it responsive to accommodation of the aging process, but as espoused by Brewer it may nevertheless be too robust in its conception of dialectical activity. Further, based on statements made by Brewer, it is questionable whether Brewer would accept the steps necessary for the adaptation.

But the reference to age in my analysis of Brewer and my concern about the robust nature of character friendship are different in kind from the demand for undiminished capacity demanded by Kraut and Hurka. The point Brewer makes remains if we import the distinction between normal aging and the "physical and psychological illness" that can accompany that aging, i.e., the distinction between Pinetop's engagement in the dialectical activities of understanding and appreciating his music and the suffering of Elizabeth Taylor, while back-tracking from Brewer's version of dialectical activity to Aristotle's theory.

While for Kraut and Hurka, aging as a concept must be "bad" for humans' chances of living a "good life" because it, by its nature, diminishes the perfectionism or developmentalism on which their virtue ethics are based, there is nothing in Brewer's account that conceptually prohibits the aged from having self-affirming evaluative outlooks or engaging in character friendships. They can still exemplify Aristotelian virtues, value and choose actions as fine or



good in themselves, and reap the corresponding benefits. They can “survey their own past actions without regret, and plan for future courses of action without fear that they will appear in their own eyes as worthless when the time for them arrives” (Brewer 2009:278).

It should not be surprising that Aristotle’s view of a proper grounding point is a type of mean between the “world making” view of Hurka and Kraut and the helpless abdication of Adams; a mean that tends more toward Adams than Hurka. If Brewer’s theory is properly grounded in Aristotle’s, it does appear possible to incorporate a more optimistic view of aging into his theory without changing the essence of the theory. Proper grounding means basing the theory not in a robust conception of dialectical activity (and certainly not in the world-making” of Hurka and Kraut), but in virtue as acting from a firm and stable disposition based on character states along with reason. It also means keeping, on the other end of the spectrum, the requirement that a person “make the best use” of whatever is dealt to her in life, rather than simply recognizing helplessness. This seems fundamentally different from simply accepting one’s helplessness as a human being and bearing up well as suggested by Adams (Adams 1999: 224). There is a significant distinction between “world making” and making the best of the world as it presents itself to us. While living a good life ethically need not require a lot of action, it is something that does require that we *do* something in an active, not simply passive, sense. The necessary level of activity may be satisfied by dialectical activity of a lesser nature than that discussed by Brewer, a level that requires only action based on a firm and stable disposition as determined with reason.

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Certified Guardian *ad Litem*, Maine Judicial Branch, Family Division (2007)  
Arbitrator, Maine Superior Court System (2007)  
Neutral Evaluator, Maine Superior Court System (2007)  
Mediator Certificate (2007)

## EDUCATION

M.A., Philosophy – University of Mississippi (2012)  
Primary Studies: Law, public policy and personal ethics  
J.D. - University of Maine School of Law (1976)  
B.S., Philosophy - Franklin & Marshall College (1973)